

FIRST NIGHT MONTEREY



Art is the Next Peace: Connecting Communities!

The October breeze blows through a classroom in a South County middle school as a group of youngsters, sons and daughters of local migrant workers, watches an art instructor set up a selection of easels and canvases. She opens jars of paint and distributes brushes and other art objects. These are their own personal canvases, she tells her young charges, and she guides them on their way through a process that is brand new—a creative process that is intended to encourage collaboration and dialog. She gets

them thinking about personal choices they can make—what color, what subject, what style, what medium. And then she asks them to think about their lives. These youngsters, ranging in age from 10 to 12, see a lot of action on a daily basis and now they're being encouraged to talk about these events.

Stories start to emerge, stories of hard times, family disputes, stories that involve violence and drugs. José is 12. He watched as his brother was shot by a gang member. "My brother is gone but not forgotten," he tells his instructor who, in turn, invites him to focus on not being forgotten and to draw that.

His is one of many disturbing stories. The dialog continues as the instructor inserts a new theme—nonviolence. She asks these South County children of migrant workers to focus on their art, to put their emotions on the canvas in a positive way. She asks them to recreate these stories, with all their emotions, in a new, positive light.



José paints a cross pierced by a heart on a green plain, with a background of dreamy white clouds against a blue sky. He writes, “In loving memory—gone but not forgotten,” and he signs his name to his first piece of art.



Gang violence is not an abstract topic for the youth of Salinas and Salinas Valley. Once known as the salad bowl of the world because of its fertile soil, Salinas is now known as the most violent city in California’s most violent county.

For each of the last two years, based on population, the California Department of Justice has determined Monterey to be the most violent county in the state. The young people of Salinas and Salinas Valley are trapped in the middle. Their lives bear striking resemblances to those of children in war zones.

Against this dramatically negative backdrop, the local community arts education initiative in the South County region was born and is taking hold. It is a collaborative effort between artist and educator Kira Carrillo Corser and the established presenting organization, [First Night Monterey](#). For the past two years, they have led the South County art project titled [Art is the Next Peace, Connecting Communities](#) (*Art is the Next Peace*). Corser has partnered with First

Night Monterey to bring young people in Monterey County together to paint stunning works of art while they experience an atmosphere free from violence. In 2011, *Art is the Next Peace* brought 57 kids together at four different workshops to learn the craft of painting. In free gatherings that took place at Challone Peaks Middle Schools in King City and at the YMCA in Soledad, fledgling artists learned visual literacy, composition, and how to render their ideas in color—but they also learned to envision a future where their goals include positive outcomes.



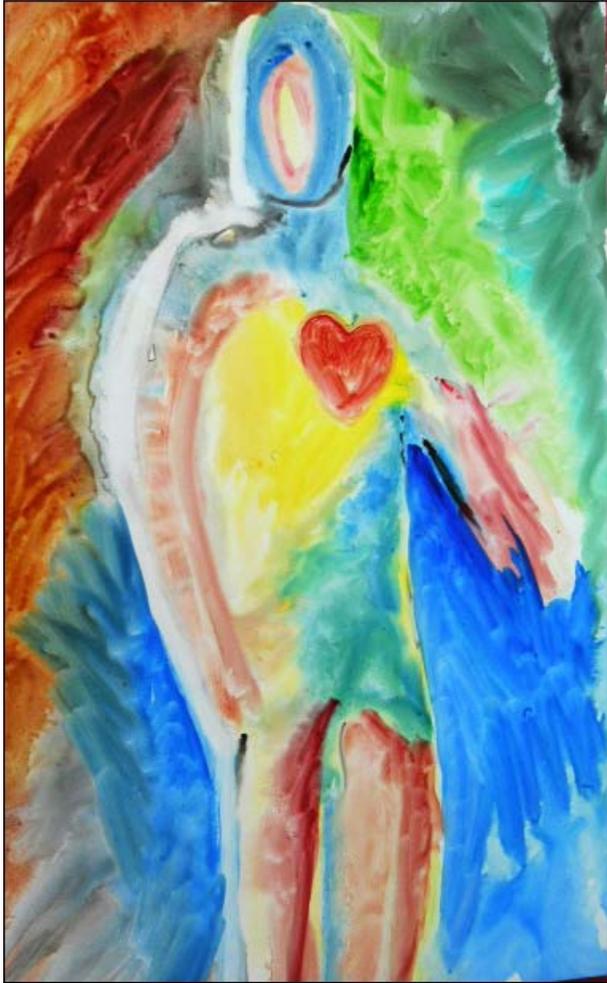
The art classes give them a supportive physical location where they know people care about them and they can feel safe. Instructor Corser says, “Art gives these kids a voice and lets them talk about things they know are wrong and allows them to envision a positive future as opposed to the hopelessness of gangs.”

Robin Cohen, Migrant Project Specialist for the Monterey County Office of Education, helped coordinate the *Art is the Next Peace* workshop with 7th and 8th graders in King City and speaks with high praise about the effect on the students there. “Doing art engaged the kids and they embraced it, talking about non-violence while they had that positive experience helped the students grow. This was a rare and great opportunity to address an issue while simultaneously working to solve it.”



At the art classes at the Soledad YMCA, Executive Director Leti Bocanegra invited the parents of the young artists to join in the workshop. Bocanegra speaks with pride about the success her Y has had with youth sports activities and she also sees the arts as critical to her mission. “I know our community needs it a lot, because not every child likes sports. When we had the parents painting on the mural with the kids it was a very anti-gang activity. It’s one of the reasons we want to become known as the arts Y.”

Funded in large part by First Night Monterey with a grant from the California Arts Council’s [Creating Public Value Program](#), *Art is the Next Peace* conducted mural painting workshops in King City, Marina, and Soledad in 2011. The best part is that these works of art don’t just disappear from view when the Art Initiative packs up its paint in the Fall. The art created by the students from the South County, Salinas, Seaside and Monterey areas is then represented at a gallery exhibition in the Monterey Conference Center and featured as part of First Night Monterey’s New Year’s Eve celebration. First Night also arranges for buses to bring young people and their families from South County to the celebration on New Year’s Eve to view their vibrant paintings and murals. Parents and family members have expressed great pride at the accomplishments of their children. In the fall of 2012, [The Corner Store](#) gallery on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, will show twenty works from the collection.



Art is the Next Peace, Connecting Communities allows young people in Monterey County to tell their story, gain confidence and find alternatives to violence, and it is proving to be an essential component to healing the communities these young artists call home.

All photos by Ellen Martin, except for *Soledad Mural* by Kira Carrillo Corser.

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